

Quality through improved service: the implementation of social networking tools in an academic library

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Abstract

This paper discusses a project that was initiated with the aim of motivating library reference staff to actively embrace the idea of implementing social networking tools in their daily work routine, highlights some of the results obtained, and offers recommendations for the future use of these tools.

In the academic environment Web 2.0 products are impacting on the practice of scholarly research and inquiry of students and faculty. The university library can and should play an important role in supporting their clients' use of these tools. Social networking tools for example, offer a wealth of opportunities for the design and delivery of new and innovative services. A Web 2.0 / Library 2.0 strategy and implementation plan has been in place in the University of Pretoria Library for a number of years. However, in spite of this focused approach towards implementing the new technologies, it became evident that the social computing tools and techniques typical of Web 2.0 were not being widely used by the reference librarians. This caused considerable concern as the quality of service that the library aims at depends to a large extent on the quality of services delivered by its reference librarians. For a successful transition to the Library 2.0 service delivery environment, skilled staff are crucial. Training sessions for the reference librarians in the use of various social networking tools were therefore held. Follow-up interviews conducted several months later showed a gratifying number of tools being implemented. Information on the use by clients of these newly introduced services, and the significance of their use, were subsequently obtained from selected academic staff as their needs and their perceived quality of service is regarded as critical for future successful application of such services. The outcomes of the project show that by advocating the use of social networking tools, the library is in an advantageous position for providing ongoing quality service in support of research and teaching at the university.

Keywords

Academic Library; Web 2.0; Library 2.0; Social Networking; Reference Work

Introduction

The Web 2.0 world and the use of social networking tools and practices have had considerable impact on scholarly communication at colleges and universities. Not only are these technologies used for teaching purposes, but researchers have also adapted their research strategies to this new environment [Bell, 2007; Ross & Sennyey, 2008]. The idea of "social scholarship" where social scholars *inter alia* discuss research findings on blogs and invite comments, write articles on restricted wikis, use social bookmarking sites as vehicles for "soft peer review" [Cohen, 2007], and where personal copyright ownership of publications and open access become (non?) negotiable issues, has become common practice.

There is general consensus amongst authors that libraries with traditional products and services only are greatly challenged in this new digital landscape [Bell, 2007]. People in search of information do not seem to mind whether the information that they find on the Internet *via* search engines or on social networking sites is correct or reliable [Burger, 2007; Hedreen et al., 2008]. Researchers and scholars are also increasingly bypassing the university library in their search for information [Ross & Sennyey, 2008]. In a study in Sweden, for example, it was found that Google was the first choice for information for many researchers, and that personal (social) networks are very important to them [Haglund & Olsson, 2008].

The functions and future of the academic library can never be considered apart from the academy as a whole, and will inevitably be influenced by the transformation of scholarship and research at the

university [No brief candle..., 2008]. The academic library thus has to fundamentally revise many of its current practices in order to stay relevant and competitive in the socially networked world, and most importantly, to provide more effective research and teaching support to their clients [Gayton, 2008; Haglund & Olsson, 2008; Ross & Sennyey, 2008]. Social networking and other Web 2.0 /Library 2.0 tools and technologies offer a wealth of opportunities to stimulate clients' passion for the library and for the design and delivery of new and innovative resources and services [ACRL, 2007; Bell, 2007].

The University of Pretoria Library Services formulated an e-information strategy in 2006 with the aim of making optimum use of the new Web 2.0 technologies to support its basic client-centred approach to service delivery [Pienaar & Smith, 2008]. Various general products and services such as RSS feeds from the catalogue, book covers sourced from Amazon.com and integrated with the catalogue, and e-mail notification via FeedBlitz when the library page is updated, have been in place for a considerable time. However, it became apparent that, although an online 24/7 general reference service was available in the library, the social computing tools and techniques typical of Web 2.0 were not being widely used by the subject reference librarians.

Meaningful reference work and research support stands at the front line of academic library services. Moving towards reference in the social environment should therefore be a natural development, and has been shown to be not only practically viable, but also to benefit the researcher [Lankes, 2008]. This paper discusses a project that was undertaken to actively encourage the implementation of these Web 2.0/Library 2.0 tools in the library, with specific focus on the reference librarians.

Implementing the project

For a successful transition to the Library 2.0 service delivery environment, it is imperative that the skills of staff evolve in response to the changing needs of the clients they serve [Abram, 2008]. The first step in the project towards "full" Library 2.0 implementation was to train the staff. Practical training sessions for the reference librarians in the use of various social networking tools such as FaceBook, Flickr, YouTube and Blogger, were held in February and March 2008. These sessions were led by experienced staff from the e-strategy team. They started off with demonstrations of the products, followed by the trainees then working with the tools themselves, for example, experimenting with creating their own FaceBook profiles, placing photos on a Flickr account and so forth. Comprehensive workbooks were also provided which proved valuable for later reference. The workshops were not compulsory as it was assumed that staff who attended voluntarily would be more "open" to new innovations and ideas and thus more inclined to introduce some of the tools.

Even though people may feel positive about the introduction of new tools and approaches to services, demands on time and the need to acquire new skills and knowledge will impact on their attitudes [ACRL, 2007]. It was thus necessary to find out what the feelings were of the reference staff with regard to the training sessions and the subsequent implementation (or not) of the social networking tools as was expected from them.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted four months after the training session to provide enough time for staff to experiment and get acquainted with the use and practical implementation of the tools. Questions concerning the interviewees' personal feelings and opinions on the workshops and the tools demonstrated at the workshops: e.g. whether workshops changed their way of thinking, were meaningful etc. were covered. They were also asked whether they had implemented any of the tools after the training sessions and the reasons for/for not doing so. Interviewees' opinions on social networking tools in general were solicited as well as on the specific individual tools covered in the training workshops.

The needs and interests of clients also have to be taken into account when introducing new services [ACRL, 2007]. Their perceptions and experiences will have a positive or negative effect on their motivation to make use of the products and services, and also on their willingness to do further business with the service provider [Horovitz, 2000]. The opinions of academic staff regarding the general use of social networking as a tool for research, and their views on the role of the reference staff as partners and support in these endeavours therefore also had to be obtained.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with selected academic staff. They were asked how familiar they were Web 2.0 products in general, whether they used any social networking tools for personal use, and whether and which tools were used professionally i.e. for research and teaching purposes. The respondents were then asked how aware they were of Web 2.0/Library 2.0 products and services offered by the library, and lastly whether they had had any communication from or with library staff regarding the use of these tools for scholarly purposes.

Overall opinions on the workshops were positive. Respondents felt that attendance stimulated new ideas, motivated them, created awareness of new tools, and the value and theoretical viability of the use of the tools were highlighted. Many of the products were (theoretically) known to the attendees, but the majority of the respondents had not used any of the products previously.

In spite of this positive experience of the Web 2.0 training sessions, the majority of the reference librarians had not implemented social networking as part of their everyday work life by June 2008 and had not had contact with their clients concerning the use of these products. In direct contrast to this the academics who were interviewed indicated that although they were to some extent still hesitant to actively go out and collaborate with peers on a personal research basis, the majority are actively exploring the other possibilities of and applications in the social networking environment.

Over time more and more people in the library ventured into the Web 2.0 / Library 2.0 world and by September 2008 some of the main social networking practices that staff were actively involved in were the following:

- A number of staff had created personal FaceBook profiles
- Three senior members of staff also created a Facebook Business page in July which can be used by other library staff members as well as students and teaching staff at the university. They envisage adding the library catalogue as soon as that application becomes available.
- A "Book of the Month" blog was undertaken by the Special Collections Section
- Various staff members at the Veterinary Library have active wikis.
- A dedicated Library 2.0 Wiki was created as an initiative of the e-Service Steering Committee of the library.
- Various videos of library activities were placed on YouTube thus serving as a vehicle for marketing and creating awareness.
- Gaming had been developed as a tool for information literacy training at the Main Campus library as well as at the Medical Library.
- Skype was introduced as a basic facility on all library computers – students and help-desk staff are expected to actively use this facility.

Looking at these initiatives, one sees that they do not reflect enough services dedicated specifically to subject reference work and further action thus became necessary. One way in which this problem was addressed was by holding a number of Library 2.0 road shows for library staff during November 2008. The aim of the road shows were to reach a larger number of people, including those who may not have been interested in attending the initial training sessions, and to demonstrate best practice for the use and implementation of Web 2.0 / Library 2.0 tools. Many of the abovementioned services were demonstrated, as well as others focusing more on reference work. These included an education blog run by the head of the Education Library, and the University of Pretoria Wiki of virtual buildings done by the Department of Architecture under the auspices of their subject reference librarian. It was foreseen that the demonstrations would not only show that social tools can easily and successfully be applied for a variety of purposes, but also encourage reference staff to actively implement these tools for their specific clients with their individual scholarly requirements.

Recommendations for the future

It cannot be realistically expected of all reference staff to implement and actively use all the available social networking tools. Clients' needs differ and individual librarians have personal preferences and unique approaches to their work. However, Web 2.0/Library 2.0 moves the web experience into a place that "closely resembles an academic learning and collaboration environment" [Abram, 2008]. Reference librarians therefore face the challenge of implementing these social networking tools to help researchers to do what they already do, but better.

A critical success factor in this endeavour is collaboration with all stakeholders in the academic scholarly environment [Bell, 2007; Gayton, 2008; Reichardt, 2008]. Clients have to recognise the importance of and the factors that contribute to the function of scholarly communication and research [Ogburn, 2008], and they must be made aware of the important supporting role that the library reference staff can play in their research and teaching activities in the social networking environment. Librarians have to be sensitive to the research needs of academic staff and of students and identify and use technologies that will improve their services to them.

Following are a number of practical recommendations for future implementation of social networking endeavours at the University of Pretoria library:

- The use of social networks, specifically FaceBook.. Many students and possibly even some of the academic staff may be unaware that there is a subject specialist in their discipline. A large number of reference staff have created personal profiles on FaceBook. Those who have not yet done this should do so. By developing a “public self” [Horizon Report 2007] contact with clients is initiated and affords an ideal opportunity to advertise reference services that are provided [Bell, 2007; Reichardt, 2008].
- Blogging offers a valuable tool for getting clients to engage with reference staff [Bell 2007]. Various “experimentations” with blogs have been undertaken in libraries elsewhere and studies show that respondents take greater ownership when answering questions within their own blog [Lankes, 2008]. Reference librarians could set up subject-specific blogs advocating their use for scholarly discussions and commenting on research findings.
- Wikis have become a powerful tool for scholarly communication in the academic environment [Bell, 2007; Cohen, 2007]. Reference librarians can approach their knowledge base in a Wikipedia-like manner where the reference questions, for example, serve as starting point for a collaboratively developed knowledge base (Lankes, 2008).
- Second Life is increasingly being explored as a library education space. Second life Library (SLL2), for example, started with the idea of taking libraries and librarians to the users in this new online environment [Hedreen et al., 2008]. Info Island has now expanded into an “archipelago of educational and informational islands” [Hedreen et al., 2008] which includes a wide range of different types of libraries and many services including reference.

Examples of the use of Second Life for general information literacy training have already been set in the university library - subject specialists could use these programmes or become involved on a subject specific basis. Their personal experiences with this tool can also serve as encouragement and support for clients who may want to implement the tool in their teaching.

- Google groups – at the time of writing the author is not aware of reference librarians using Google groups although such a staff group was formed for general discussions and exchange of information regarding Library 2.0. For reference purposes Google groups offers the feature of being able to upload documents which cannot be currently done with FaceBook.
- Connotea, a free online reference management tool where researchers can save and organize links to their references and can share references with their colleagues, is already advocated on the UP Library 2.0 wiki. Reference workers should take note and familiarize themselves with the tool in order to recommend it to researchers.
- The current Skype facilities could be expanded for use in reference work. As it provides a free multifaceted seamless user experience [Booth, 2008] it could be worthwhile to investigate its use as a virtual reference service.

Conclusion

The University of Pretoria Library has moved into the realms of open access and general Web 2.0/Library 2.0 products offering services that have been shown to be on par with academic libraries worldwide. It is now up to the reference librarians to focus on increased efficiency and value-added services by increasing their Web presence and fully exploiting the social networking environment.

The outcomes of the project discussed in this paper show that by advocating the use of social networking tools, the library is in a favourable position for providing ongoing quality service in support of research and teaching at the university. In conclusion one can thus apply the essence of Bell's statement to the current situation, namely that the potential of using these social networking tools to providing such services “is limited only by academic librarians' imagination” [Bell, 2007].

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